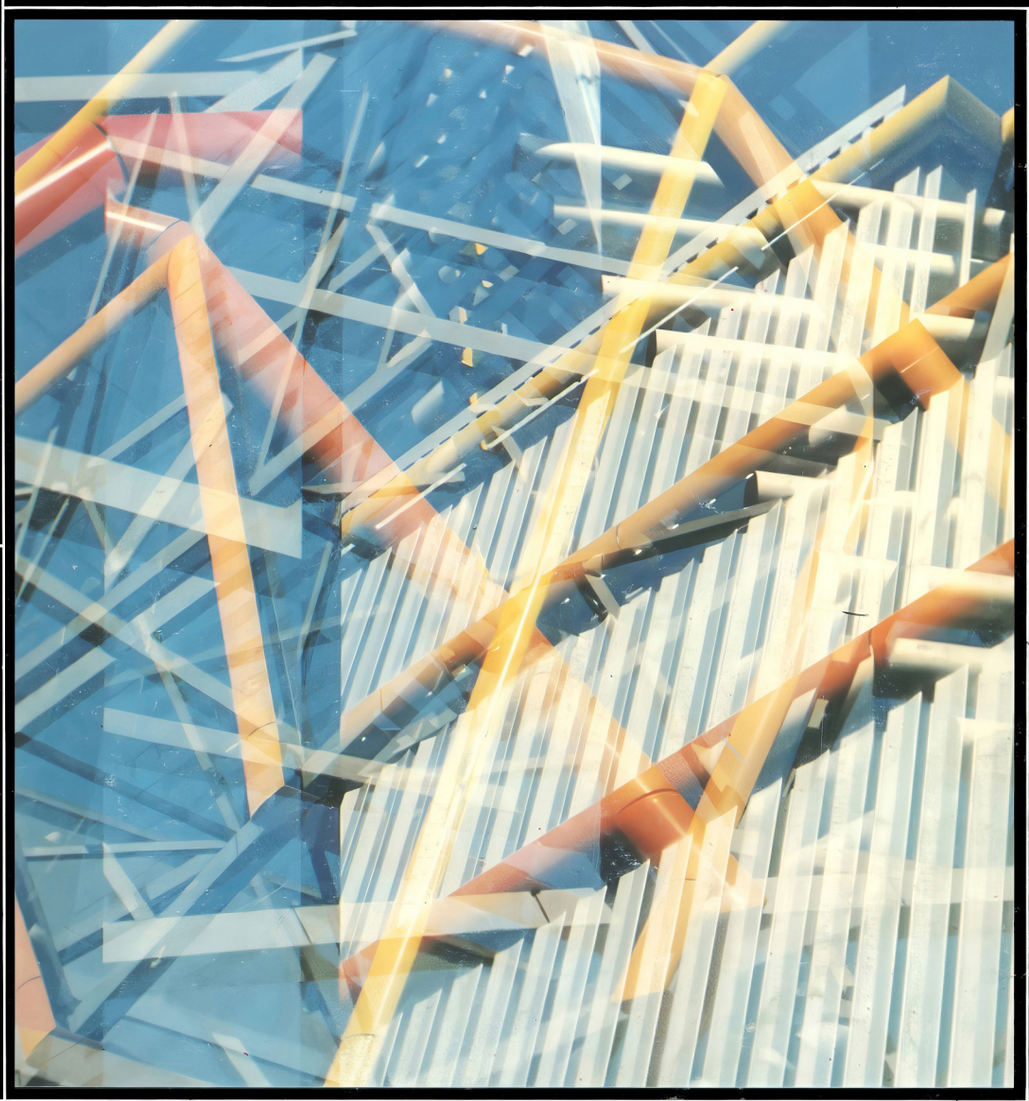
CREATIVE REVIEW



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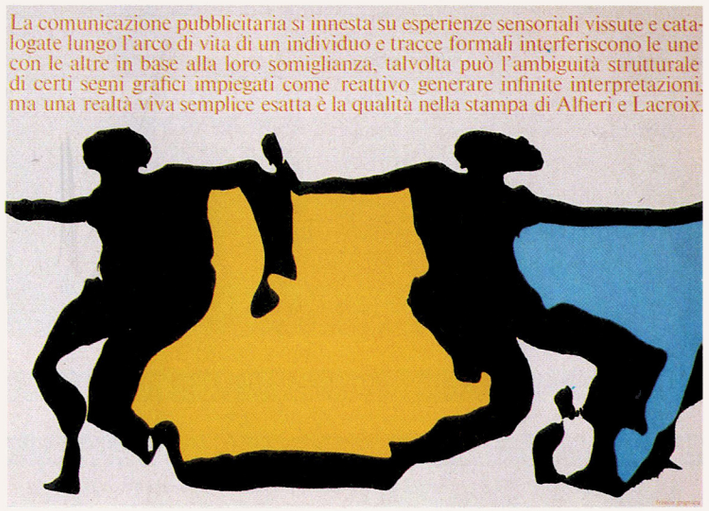
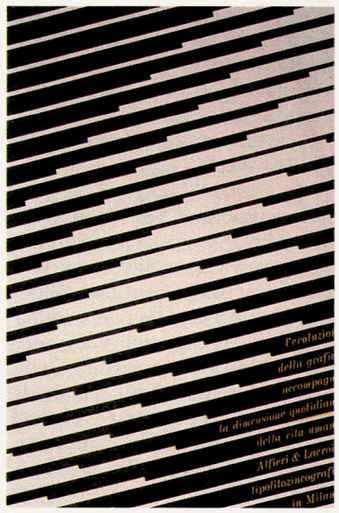
The distortions of letterform and subtle compositional upsets that feature in much modern commercial graphic design have been pioneered by septuagenarian designer Franco Grignani. Peter Gyllan assesses the Italian's contribution

Milanese master


La comunicazione pubblicitaria si innesta su esperienze sensoriali vissute e catalogate lungo l'arco di vita di un individuo e tracce formali interferiscono le une con le altre in base alla loro somiglianza, talvolta può l'ambiguità strutturale di certi segni grafici impiegati come reattivo generare infinite interpretazioni, ma una realtà viva semplice esatta è la qualità nella stampa di Alfieri e Lacroix.

Advertisement by Franco Grignani for typefounding film Alfieri & Lacroix



Poster: playing with optics

There was a time when typography in press advertising and poster design was merely a simple support intended to fill up the spaces left by the illustration. The fact that nowadays it is often a violent blow of colour and type seems to many to be the result of quite random development.

But many of the innovations in manipulating and distorting type have in fact been painstakingly researched. Look at the work of Franco Grignani, the Italian who has been a major influence on international graphic design for the last couple of decades.

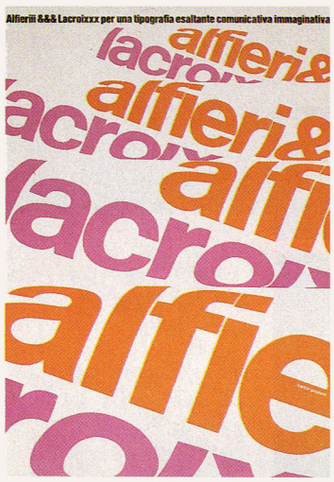
Milan – where Grignani lives, works and teaches – has long been a style centre and Grignani one of the city's favoured design sons. Born in 1908, Grignani trained initially as an architect. And although he swiftly turned his attention to painting, experimental photography and graphics, his architectural education and discipline have left their traces in the way he applies to science for artistic suggestion and the way he considers a research methodology elementary for any aesthetic exploration.

Between 1950 and the late seventies, Grignani conducted a series of graphic optical experiments, explored a wide range of visual distortions, permutations and fluctuations, and presented some puzzling ways to distort shapes and letter forms. His conclusion after producing something like 15,000 examples was that distorting a pattern doesn't necessarily bring about its destruction. On the contrary it is made much more startling due to the emergence of internal tensions, which in turn have a physical effect on the observer.

That's the intellectual side of it. In terms of aesthetics, this meant quite a counterpoint to the purist graphic design of the Swiss school of the late fifties and early sixties.

Grignani's experimental designs can be found in the collections of New York's Museum of Modern Arts, Amsterdam's Stedelijk, London's Victoria & Albert, and in a number of other museums. He has held more than 50 one-man exhibitions both in Italy and abroad. For 26 years he has art directed *Publicita in Italia,* and for 12 years the magazine *Bellezza d'Italia.*

Grignani is currently head of the visual design department at Milan's Accademia di Belle Arti. The recently published book *Art & Graphics* by Willy Rotzler (ABC Edition, Zurich) places him where he truly belongs – on the border between fine and applied art. What I find most exciting about the man's graphic design on posters and advertisements – especially his work for typefounding firm Alfieri & Lacroix – is his keen observation and analysis of visual distortions.



Alfieri & Lacroix catalogue

These, he explains, "occur especially in the urban environment – in the surfaces of buildings, in glass and in metals, in the painted bodies of motor cars, and in numerous shiny objects that designers create."

Grignani has done much to influence the style of contemporary commercial graphics; the look of sudden violence in printed matter, the compositional upset, the emphatic expression of structural tension all owe their origins in part to this talented Italian. □

Peter Gyllan is a graphic designer based in Copenhagen

Quando la grafica diventa musica,
quando la tipografia diventa figurale,
quando i problemi di stampa diventano complessi,
ricordiamo le tecniche di Alfieri & Lacroix,
tipolitozincografia in Milano.

Grignani advertisement: striking the right rhythm in type